

# Rainbow in The Convent: LGBTQ+ Community and Religious Vocation Inclusivity

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## Abstract

This study sought to determine the acceptability of the LGBTQ+ community and religious vocation inclusivity among the select residents in the City of San Pablo, Laguna in the Philippines. Transcendental phenomenology was employed using twenty respondents and were interviewed via Google Meet. Results showed that the respondents were generally accepting the LGBTQ+ community towards religious vocation inclusivity. Majority of them were generally accepting the LGBTQ+ members based on three thematic areas identified such as religious vocation as a call for everyone, LGBTQ+ expressions of religiosity and LGBTQ+ members as church leaders. However, the study also presented areas of development the LGBTQ+ community and religious institutions could dialogue towards improved welfare of the LGBTQ+ community in the realm of religious vocation inclusivity. Hence, this paper suggests further representation of LGBTQ individuals in various religious activities, and educational drive and discussions with religious organizations. The results imply a starting element for further research and education for both the LGBTQ+ and religious communities.

**Keywords:** *LGBTQ+, Vocation, Religious life, Inclusivity, Church learders*

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## 1. Introduction

Human rights and respect for diversity are inextricably linked. Respect for diversity ultimately originates from the due recognition of every human being's inherent dignity, which underpins human rights norms and standards. Unfortunately, in some contexts, religious diversity and sexuality (WHO, 2016) are not always perceived as harmonious. In some religious communities, a narrow understanding of legitimate expressions of sexuality continues to prevail. Attempts to recognize and respect the existing diversity of sexual orientations, and gender identities and expressions (SOGIE) have thus caused bitter political and legal conflicts with some representatives of religious communities. This would erode any attempts at pursuing a consistent, coherent, and truly universal human rights agenda. At a more practical level, antagonistic constructions of the various human rights norms allegedly opposed to each other would tear apart the life-world of all those human beings—indeed many millions of people—who wish to experience respect both for their religious vocation and for the expressions of their sexuality.

In the Philippines, although there were major developments on the protection of the rights and equality of LGBTQ+ community in education, politics, economic, mainstream media and industry, there are still some religious institutions like the Catholic Church reluctant to the conversation of the so-called religious vocation inclusivity. Benedict XVI (2005), in one of the church documents instructed that the Church *“cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called ‘gay culture.’ Such persons, in fact, find themselves in a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women.”*

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, a text that contains dogmas and teachings of the Church, names homosexual acts as *“intrinsically immoral and contrary to the natural law,”* and describes homosexual tendencies as *“objectively disordered.”* While the Catholic Church does not consider homosexual orientation sinful in and of itself, it does have a very negative attitude toward it. *“Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder”* (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992, n. 2357)

Vocation is a concept familiar to both the sacred and secular constituents of the society. Those holding the secular perspective define vocations one's work, career, or occupation. In contrast, Christians view vocations as calling from God. God calls a "*person with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace*" (2 Tim1:9). This holy calling refers to hearing and understanding God's voice in one's life and obeying the summons given. Thus, vocation, or one's calling, brings divine meaning and purpose to the life of a Christian (Miller-Perin, 2013). There is no official policy regarding transgender individuals in the Catechism of the Catholic Church though doctrinal teachings clearly equate birth anatomy with gender. The Vatican's Extraordinary Synod, convened in October 2014, debated several issues related to LGBTQ+ inclusion but did not address questions regarding transgender church members.

Religion plays a major role in the lives of Filipinos with the strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church. This affects LGBTQ+ people though a survey suggests Filipinos are generally accepting of LGBTQ+ even while the church opposes anti-discrimination policies and sometimes seeks to influence public policy in a negative way (UNDP, USAID, 2014, p. 8). Hence, this study assessed the acceptability of LGBTQ+ community and religious vocation inclusivity. The results could describe how far the issues on gender equality have reached the religious dimension and perception of the people.

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1. Attitude Towards LGBTQ+***

Men and women have various attitudes towards LGBTQ+ community. Men's attitudes toward homosexuals tend to be more negative than those of women. Attitudes towards the homosexual people, the socio-demographic correlates of these attitudes, and the potential gender differences, that means attitudes depend upon how people dealt with them, has a distinctive correlation between the two. In some findings, women held more favorable attitudes than men and men held more favorable attitudes toward female than male homosexuality, whereas women did not differentiate (Steffens & Wagner, 2014). Heterosexual person with more interpersonal contact has more favorable attitude to the extent that they will evolve more close relationship and receive direct disclosure about another's homosexuality. On the other hand, a study about homosexuality still argues that homosexual

relations should be neither acceptable nor legal. However, with prior knowledge on the issue, these attitudes had changed overtime. Some people have already accepted the presence of third sex while some still feel personal discomfort with lesbians/gay men. In addition, institutional homophobia towards lesbian/gay men and the deviance/changeability factors were separate; they were highly correlated and showed little evidence of divergent validity.

Men and women have no difference in their overall level of homophobia. Although both sexes were associated with having acquaintance and friends, such homophobic act may occur if a person is really against third sex community. With such paranoia, this attitude may result to anxiety, discomfort or stress to homosexual people. These attitudes may lead to homophobic prejudice, social rejection, discrimination, and harassment (Steffens & Wagner, 2014). Being confronted with these uncomfortable situations, in turn, is linked to negative mental health outcomes, including depression, drug use, and suicide attempts. Since well-being among gay and lesbian people is a significant public health concern in recent decades, many scholars in Western countries have addressed attitudes related to same-sex attraction and behavior, and policy makers have aimed to reduce discrimination and contribute to a generally positive social atmosphere (Ochoa et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the attitudes of heterosexuals may vary among the people within the society.

There are other studies on the correlation of religion and views concerning homosexuality. For example, Christians will on average be more negative in their views towards homosexuality compared to Jews and those reporting no religious preference. Religious affiliations may affect an individual's attitude towards homosexuality like, when attitudes over a 20 or 30-year period are compared, fewer conservative Christians report believing homosexuality is morally wrong today than in the past. While still the most condemning of homosexual behavior, evangelical Christians as a group are becoming more tolerant in their views toward homosexuality. Thus, religious people somehow did not accept homosexual in the community. The more literally people view the Bible the more intolerant they become towards certain fringe groups including homosexuals (Agbayani, 2017). As biblical literalism increases, believing homosexuality as always wrong increases as well. In fact, religious individuals are selectively intolerant of homosexuals because they are perceived to be acting contrary to traditional religious teachings (Bader & Froese, 2015).

## 2.2. Vocation

Having deep compassion for the harassed and helpless crowd, like sheep without a shepherd, Jesus said to his disciples: *“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest”* (Matthew 9:36-38). This plea is resounded more insistently today than ever in some places as there are less and less people interested in priesthood and religious life, especially in European countries (Radio-vaticana, 2016). According to an observation by Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Asia is welcoming a significant rise in the number of vocations, Africa has a continuous increase, Latin America is seeing over in number, North America is experiencing difficulties and Europe and Australia are undergoing a crisis in the number of vocations (Peloso, 2016). Asia is so privileged that cultures, social conditions and other factors are still holding some elements that encourage priestly and religious vocations.

Pope Paul VI in his papal decree *Optatam Totius* (no. 2) in 1965 (Paul IV, 1965) reemphasizes Canon Law 233 §1: *“The duty of fostering vocations pertains to the whole Christian community, which should exercise it above all by a fully Christian life.”* In this Decree on Priestly Training, the pope asserts that a unanimous effort of the whole people of God through constant prayers, Christian penance and training of the faithful is a proper means that the people of God beseeches God to show Divine Providence about whom God wants to choose (no.2). The special gifts that God grants the chosen ones are not only to benefit themselves but also, by large, for the benefit of all Christ’s faithful, and to contribute to the Church’s saving mission (Canon Law §2). About religious vocations, Pope Paul VI in Decree on The Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis* makes clear that serious effort should be made in fostering vocations in order that the Church is strengthened and has its needs met. By this, the pope emphasizes the significance and importance of religious life in the Church. In professing the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, religious people proclaim that God is their only true love which frees their heart to be inflamed with love for God and for all; that God is their only true possession; and that their lives are but to submit to the salvific will of God. Because the state of religious life is for the common good of Christ’s body - the Church, every baptized namely priests,

Christian educators and parents should instill Christian values and virtues in young people to nurture and protect religious vocations (Paul VI, 1992).

### ***2.3. Theoretical framework***

To provide empirical grounding to the questions, the study utilized the following theories advocated by authorities as basis for designing a theoretical guide in which this study was premised.

According to Oparra (2021), gender equality is the state of equal ease of access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender, including economic participation and decision-making; and the state of valuing different behaviors, aspirations, and needs equally, regardless of gender. Gender preference for boys over girls is deeply culturally embedded. From birth, many women experience gendered disadvantages, less access to scarce resources, poorer health care, higher child mortality, limited education, less employment outside of the home, and circumscribed autonomy (Baring et al., 2018). The Planned Parenthood stated that, *“gender roles in society means how we’re expected to act, speak, dress, groom and conduct ourselves based upon our assigned sex. For example, girls and women are generally expected to dress in typically feminine ways and be polite, accommodating, and nurturing. Men are generally expected to be strong, aggressive, and bold”* (Johnson, 2021).

Allen (2013) theorized that the essential gender sensitivity between and among males, females, and those in the LGBTQ+ community lies in the gamete they produce. By sexual reproduction is implied the transfer of genetic information as a preliminary to multiplication. Primarily, it is part of the system of genetic recombination that makes possible by parental inheritance, natural selection, and the adoptive evolution of the male and female generation of races. The collaborative gender sensitive as described by Gruenert (2015) must be created. Evidence supports that government’s gender sensitivity strongly affects their respective personnel performance. Employees are greatly motivated if their heads quite know their role as gender sensitivity managers (Liethwood et al., 2014 as cited in Orr, 2016).

Furthermore, social role theory is a social psychological theory that pertains to sex differences and similarities in social behavior. Its key principle is that differences and similarities arise primarily from the distribution of men and women into social roles within their society. Through socialization and the formation of gender roles, the behaviors of men

and women generally support and sustain the division of labor. In industrialized economies, for example, social roles are organized so that women are more likely than men to be homemakers and primary caretakers of children and to hold caretaking jobs in the paid economy. In contrast, men are more likely than women to be primary family providers and to assume full-time roles in the paid economy, often ones that involve physical strength, assertiveness, or leadership skills (Eagly & Wood, 2016).

### **3. Methodology**

This study utilized qualitative research method employing transcendental phenomenological design. Its focus was to facilitate and provide in-depth lived experiences of the respondents practicing Christian faith as to their perception on the LGBTQ+ community and religious vocation inclusivity.

The data gathering took place in the City of San Pablo, Laguna in the year 2021. Potential participants for this study were identified through a couple of methods to get a diverse source of possible participants and to get the most qualified participants. First method was done through giving of notifications to majority of participants using a status posting on Instagram and Facebook informing that interested people can contact the researcher through an online prospective participant screening survey. Second method was done through the researcher's personal network of contacts.

For this study, 20 participants were identified through a purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2015). The participants were individuals who are residents of San Pablo, 18 years old and above, identified themselves as practicing Christian faith, and members of any religious denominations. The majority of the respondents belong to the age bracket of 18-30 years old with a total of 10 respondents, followed by 46-65 with 8 and there were 2 respondents from the age bracket of 31-45. The respondents were dominated by female, accounting 14 while the rest were male (6 respondents). Moreover, more than half of respondents were college graduates (12), followed by doctorate (2) and master's degree graduates (6). In terms of status, 9 respondents were married, 8 were single, and 3 were separated. In terms of religion, majority of respondents were Roman Catholics (13) and the remaining were Born Again Christians (7). Lastly, in terms of extent of church involvement,

all of them are serving their particular churches as choir members, youth ministry members, lectors, and Marian devotees.

A set of semi-structured interview questions was used in this study. Interview protocol, including the research questions, was utilized throughout the initial in-depth interview for an hour during the respondents' free time. The interview notes were accompanied by the audio or video recordings of the interviews.

After securing the approval from the external validators of the interview questions, the process of the collection of data started with the initial screening. This includes the discussion of the purpose of the study and the expectations of participants during the interview process. An informed-consent form, the details of the study, and a request for a date for the first interview were sent or given to the participants. The conduct of the interviews was either through a video-conferencing tool or in-person face to face, depending on agreement of the interviewer and the participants.

Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Transcripts from the interviews were analyzed for codes and themes, and the specific procedures for analysis followed a modification of Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975) as described by Moustakas (1994). Transcendental phenomenology was chosen as the appropriate methodology for this research as there was searching for an understanding of the meaning of these participants' experiences. Additionally, the systemic procedures and detailed data analysis steps as outlined by Moustakas (1994) are ideal for assisting less experienced researchers. The transcendental approach using systemic procedures is consistent with philosophical view of balancing both the objective and subjective approaches to knowledge and detailed, rigorous data analysis steps.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

In exploring the acceptability of the LGBT community towards religious vocation inclusivity, the study adopted Chen and Hamilton's (2015) definition of social acceptance, which is the quality of being accepted by a certain organization or group, including the psychological inclusion of a minority in a certain community. Social acceptance is linked to pro-social behaviors or voluntary behaviors intended to benefit others.



The results discuss the acceptability ratings of selected respondents as regards the LGBTQ+ and religious vocation inclusivity on thematic areas, namely, (1) religious policies, (2), LGBTQ+ expressions of religiosity. (3) LGBTQ+ as church leaders.

Generally, being a member of the community is acceptable among the respondents, as majority of the statements were rated as acceptable. According to a respondent, the LGBTQ+ community has equal rights and deserves equal respect as any other human being. The respondents also stated that LGBTQ+ individuals are committed, competent, and practice exemplary work ethics, kind and religious so most of them find it acceptable to mingle and work with. Additionally, as another respondent related, gender should never be a basis for employment or roles in an organization; instead, competencies and skills should be emphasized (Participant 12, Transcript 13).

### ***1. Religious Vocation is a call for everyone***

Participants narrated their thoughts on religious calling; majority of them expressed deep respect and reverence to the particular way of life. One of the respondents even stated that *“vocation is one’s response to a call from beyond oneself to use one’s strengths and gifts to make the world a better place through service, creativity, and leadership”* (Participant 1, Transcript 2). Other respondents declared that *“vocation is based on the idea that each individual person has unique strengths and gifts with which they can make a positive contribution to the good of the earth community. Each of us has interests and passions that can propel us in directions of service and creativity. By living my life as a response to a call, I find meaning in my work and give purpose to my life.”* In addition, one respondent stated that *“recognizing that vocation is not static but dynamic and alive, it transcends color, race, language and even gender orientation”* (Participant 8, Transcript 6).

*“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”* (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7). According to Fowler (2013), vocation is the response a person makes with his or her total self to the address of God and to the calling of partnership. The shaping of vocation as a total response of the self to the address of God involves the orchestration of leisure, relationships, work, private life, public life, and the

resources steward, so as to put it all at the disposal of God's purposes in the services of God and the neighbor. Everyone in the Church, precisely because they are members, receives and thereby shares in the common vocation to holiness. In the fullness of this title and on equal par with all other members of the Church, the lay faithful are called to holiness: "*All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.*" All of Christ's followers are invited and bound to pursue holiness and the perfect fulfillment of their own state of life (Christifideles Laici, 1998).

## **2. LGBTQ+ expressions of Religiosity**

The importance of religion to numerous Filipino Catholics is also demonstrated in the celebration of religious traditions and practices. In fact, one respondent mentioned that during the feast and celebrations in their church, majority of the leading figures and actors in the said feast are members of the LGBTQ+ community (Participant 2, Transcript 3). For example, in Aklan, one of the highlights is the Ati-Atihan festival, which is a carnivalesque street-dance. The Ati-Atihan festival, for a certain time, provided an opportunity for a transgender person named "Tay Augus" to show devotion to the Christ Child, claim membership in the Roman Catholic community, and negotiate the Catholic Church's institution of heterosexuality (Castillo et al., 2021). Meanwhile, a respondent added that in their local parish church, the lay church leaders are mostly members of the LGBTQ+ community. She further quipped that during the church liturgical celebrations, majority of the persons responsible during procession, street mass, and other liturgical and para-liturgical rites are mostly assisted by the LGBTQ+ members (Participant 15, Transcript 9).

Another example of the affection of many Filipino Catholics for Mary is demonstrated in a traditional Marian celebration called Flores de Mayo (i.e. flowers of May), often connected with the Santacruzán (Holy Cross of Jesus). The Santacruzán is being celebrated every month of May wherein children, young men, and women dressed in fine clothes, parade through the streets to commemorate Queen Helen and Prince Constantine's discovery of the cross of Jesus. Although the sagala (maidens) in a Santacruzán ritual are presumably straight females, there are also many LGBTQ+ groups in partnership with local governments who organize parades and empower gay people to be "sa-gay-la", (a portmanteau of sagala and gay) (Reyes, 2015).

In the Philippines, All Saints Day and the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls Day) are usually non-working holidays that provide the living, whether religious or not, the opportunity to visit (usually the cemetery), and pray for relatives and friends who have passed on. Interestingly, in 2015, a cemetery in Cavite (a province in the Philippines located in Luzon) was dedicated by the local government to the members of the LGBTQ+ community. Conceived as a “safe space” for LGBTQs to honor the dead and pray, the apartment-type tombs in the cemetery are either painted pink (for deceased gay men) or in rainbow colors (for deceased lesbians and other LGBTQs). Additionally, the grave markers do not only contain the legal name of the deceased but also their alias or gay name. However, in 2019 the cemetery lost its exclusivity because even non-LGBT people have been buried there (Abrina, 2019).

The importance of Christian ideology to many Filipinos is demonstrated in their strong beliefs on God’s role in health and well-being (Patinio, 2020). For a significant number of older Filipinos, the Christian faith serves as a source of strength and a protective buffer to stress and suffering. As such, many Christians demonstrate their religiosity in public, such as going to church regularly and attending church activities and religious gatherings (Buenaventura et al., 2020).

### ***3. LGBTQ+ as Church leaders***

In the context of this thematic, it is very interesting that majority of the selected respondents have positive outlook on the possibility of LGBTQ+ as Church leaders. Most of the respondents held no reservations about having an LGBTQ+ individual as church leader, as they can see that majority of them are sincere, passionate and faithful members of their religions. One respondent even said that LGBTQ individuals being leaders of a religious organization might be the future reality of the different religious organization, as long as they do not engage in sexual relationships and that they are committed to their faith. One of the respondent reiterated that someone who is adhering to the norm of chastity, someone who is following the covenants, and the standards, teachings of the gospel of Christ, though they may be dealing with same-sex attraction, really has no reason they cannot be fully participative, that they cannot be a full-fledged member of the Church and hold callings, speak, and enter the temple, and serve there, and all the other opportunities and blessings that can come from Church membership will be available to them (Participant 7, Transcript 12).

The early Christian church was born in Judaism but developed across the known world. The church has confronted controversial topics such as who is welcome, and who is not, since the earliest days of Christianity. For example, the record of disagreement in the New Testament about the inclusion of Gentiles was largely between leaders of the early church. Even so, the impact of the local culture and the impact on local believers is clear in the Christian scriptures; notably as Paul and Peter experienced dreams and the guidance of the Holy Spirit leading them to decisions of inclusion of Gentiles (Acts 13: 44; Acts 10: 9–22).

The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists and the American Baptists Concerned became welcoming and affirming in their congregations. For other denominations the days of disagreement and of discernment continue. For example, factions of the United Methodist Church (UMC) disagree today about the same points of difference present in the 1960s culminating recently in a proposal for a denominational split over marriage equality and LGBTQ+ clergy ordination (Anderson, 2020). On the other hand, some denominations break ties with congregations that deviate from the denomination's decision. For example, while a Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) position statement is to respect the autonomy of the local church, the decision to be welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ+ people can result in disaffiliation for the congregation (Harris et al., 2020). Finally, some denominational decisions (examples include Presbyterian and Episcopalian) included the option for local congregations to make their own determinations about LGBTQ+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage equality.

## **5. Conclusion**

At its inception, the study sought to explore the religious vocation inclusivity with the lived realities of Filipino LGBTQ+ members. The study outcomes confirm that for the thematic 1, the respondents believed that religious vocation is a call for everyone transcending race, color, language and even gender. With regards to thematic 2, LGBTQ+ expressions of religiosity, it is also widely agreed based on the statements pronounced by the respondents that the importance of Christian ideology to many Filipinos is demonstrated in their strong beliefs on God's role in health and well-being. Meanwhile the thematic 3, on the acceptability of LGBTQ+ members as Church leaders, it is really groundbreaking and

surprising to see that majority of the respondents show positive regards on its possibility. They can see that majority of them are sincere, passionate and faithful members of their religions. Moreover, the study presented the areas of development that the LGBTQ+ community and religious institutions should have communication to further improve the welfare of the LGBTQ+ community in the realm of religious vocation inclusivity.

In the light of the findings, it is necessary to establish good ties and communication with LGBTQ+ individuals. Establishing positive relationships and interactions with this community through events designed to achieve religious goals may improve the social acceptance of the community. This is supported by the positive association between the frequency of contact with an LGBTQ+ individuals and the acceptability ratings given by the respondents. It is also suggested to develop educational drive and discussions with religious organizations. Since it is already an epoch of gender equality and empowerment, dialogues, and discussions with religious organizations may be explored as an option to improve the acceptability of LGBTQ+ members in the realm of religious calling called vocation.

Recognizing the limited demographics involved in the study, further studies may be done using large sample size and could explore the perspective of the religious persons such as pastor, nuns and priest. In addition, interviewing selected religious authorities will further confirm or debunk the data gathered and triangulate it with LGBTQ+ individuals in the community.

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